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ABSTRACT

Juvenile political biographies of contemporary American women can provide important role models for elementary school girls in the process of exploring careers. While there is a paucity of juvenile political biographies of contemporary women, a number of excellent ones do exist. These can be used in a variety of ways, including using one biography for an in-depth study of one woman's career, studying two biographies to compare different women's lives and careers, comparing two biographies of the same woman to appreciate the influence of the individual biographer upon the portrayal of an individual, examining biographies as part of the social studies curriculum, and reading biographies as a source from which to extract strategies for success at lower-level positions. Included among the existing excellent juvenile biographies of prominent female politicians are Alice Fleming's "The Senator from Maine, Margaret Chase Smith"; Doris Faber's "Bella Abzug"; Susan Brownmiller's "Shirley Chisholm, a Biography"; James Haskin's "Barbara Jordan"; and Peggy Lawson's "In the Vanguard, Six American Women in Public Life." (MN)

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EXPLORING WOMEN'S POLITICAL CAREERS THROUGH BIOGRAPHIES

Career options for women have rapidly expanded as reflected in the increasing numbers of women in various professional and business positions. These women can serve as important role models for elementary school girls in the process of exploring careers.

Unfortunately, there continues to be relatively few women in political careers. Young girls who might be interested in political careers have few highly visible role models. To compensate for this deficiency, juvenile political biographies can be a source of inspiration, information, and role models.

Educators' attempts to convince young girls that they can aspire to a high level political position is often inconsistent with what the girls conclude from their exposure to the media. Experiences with political biographies can foster a more accurate and realistic conception of women's involvement in political careers. Biographies offer credibility in their portrayal of women's political carrers. Readers gain insight into the dynamics of successful strategies in the development of women's political careers. Well-written contemporary biographies describe in detail the heroine's background, acquisition of political skills, constituency building, and other critical factors related to political career development.

While there is a paucity of juvenile political biographies of contemporary American women, this should not deter educators

from fully utilizing those available. There are a number of excellent choices which can be used in a variety of ways. One biography can be selected for an in-depth study of a women's political career. Two or more biographies can be camparatively analyzed to illuminate the commonalities and differences in these women's life and career histories. Two biographies of the same woman can be studied for an appreciation of the influence of the individual biographer upon the portrayal and for the increased information and insights which can be provided by multiple resources.

The biographies which would be most useful in career education are those of American women who have made major political contributions in the second half of the twentieth century. Biographies of women who have pursued political careers in other countries or in nineteenth and early twentieth century American history are informative and should be included in the social studies curriculum. While biographies tend to be limited to those women who have achieved high level political positions, they provide detailed comprehensive information on these women's earlier political positions. Models of strategies for success in these lower level positions are abundant for those who might be interested in local and state political careers. An examination of several of these biographies will illustrate their potiential as resources for career education.

In Alice Fleming's The Senator From Maine, Margaret Chase

Smith[1] the heroine was portrayed as a women whose lack of a college education did not interfere with her career development. Her commercial training in high school combined with her ability, ambition and resourcefulness quickly led her to a series of increasingly responsible positions. As the circulation manager for a weekly newspaper, she demonstrated her extraordinary organizational and social skills. Her marriage to Clyde Smith, a state senator, introduced her to politics. She acquired important political experience traveling with her husband as he campaigned for Congress throughout the state of Maine. Upon his election, she became his secretary working twelve to fifteen hours a day, researching bills, and accompanying him on fact-finding missions.

Following her husband's premature death, she was appointed to complete his unexpired term, then continued to be elected on her own merits in succeeding terms. Her roles as Congresswoman ranged from serving on numerous important Congressional committees to traveling abroad and writing a syndicated newspaper column.

Fleming's description of Smith's campaign for the Republican nomination in Maine for U.S. Senate was especially revealing. Smith's successful nomination and election were credited to her vigorous barnstorming - driving her own car supplied with boxes of campaign paraphernalia to pre-arranged meetings throughout the state demonstrating the person-to-person contact necessary in politics.

[1]Alice Fleming, The Senator From Maine, Margaret Chase Smith (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969.

A quote from Smith when she sought the Republican nomination for President in 1964 is a model of self-confidence for ambitious young girls: "I'd like to be President. I think my experience and my record are greater than any other candidate or any other of the unannounced candidates. It's a real challenge, and that's one of the paramount things. When people keep telling you that you can't do a thing, you kind of like to try it."[2]

In Bella Abzug,[3] Doris Faber wrote that from Abzug's high school graduation, she wanted to be a lawyer. At Hunter College she became president of the student body through organizing her high school's contingent who aided in her campaign. Upon beginning a law career, Abzug committed herself to community service accepting numerous invitations to join committees and attend meetings on behalf of worthy causes.

The importance of Abzug's husband's support and assistance related to both her career and child-rearing roles was stressed. For example, his more predictable schedule allowed him to be home before dinner and to spend evenings with the children while Abzug was working. Campaigning for U.S. Congress among constituents in Manhatten often demanded sixteen-hour days.

Faber portrayed Abzug's individual, flamboyant style as contributing to her success. When campaigning, her gestures, voice and New York accent were exaggerated for greater impact. Another interesting technique was her beginning each speech with a little joking until she sensed the audience's warmth,

[2]Ibid., p. 126.

[3]Doris Faber, Bella Abzug (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company, 1976).

then launching into some political appeal. Further, she never read her speeches, but spoke naturally - a strategy she had learned from her experience in courtrooms.

Her commitment as a woman to women's rights issues was exemplified by her strong support of the Equal Rights Amendment and federal aid to day-care centers. Her 1970 campaign slogan ("This women's place is in the House - the House of Representatives.") illustrated her positive and determined attitude toward women's achievements.

Shirley Chisholm, a Congressional colleague of Bella Abzug, also displayed an early interest in politics. Susan Brownmiller in Shirley Chisholm, A Biography,[4] reported that Chisholm was a serious student of American history during her public school years and was especially interested in the lives of three women: Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony and Mary McLeod Bethune. Her interest in people led Chisholm to a college sociology major. Her outstanding extracurricular activity was debating in which she proved to have exceptional linguistic and persuasive abilities. Chisholm's competence in Spanish allowed her to canvass the Puerto Rican people in her neighborhood for the Unity Democratic Club through which she actively promoted cooperation among black, white and Puerto Rican people. Soon after, as a member of the state assembly, she was responsible for the initiation of a scholarship program for black and Puerto Rican college students.

During her successful Congressional campaign, Shirley Chisholm made many brief street corner speeches to voters in

[4]Susan Brownmiller, Shirley Chisholm, A Biography, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970).

her district. While these meetings were tough and exhausting, Chisholm recognized the importance of close contact with voters. Her clever responses to the hecklers effectively deflected potential problems.

In Barbara Jordan,[5] another political biography of a black woman, James Haskins explained Jordan's decision to become a lawyer; while still in high school, she was convinced by an inspiring address by Edith Sampson, a black lawyer from Chicago.

Following Jordan's graduation from law school and admission to the bar, she became involved in politics willingly performing such menial tasks as stuffing envelopes and running mimeograph machines. She progressed to making speeches after proving herself one evening as a substitute speaker in another woman's absence.

In recognition of her organizational ability, Jordan was given directorship of the "Get Out the Vote" drive in Houston's (Texas) black community. Soon after, she was an unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic nomination for state representative. That she wasn't devastated by her loss was evident by her enthusiastic acceptance of an appointment as a county administrative assistant for welfare - the first black person to occupy this position. When she eventually won an election to the Texas state senate, she intensively studied the rules and procedures in the legislative handbooks and was soon sought for advice on procedural matters.

[5]James Haskins, Barbara Jordan (New York: The Dial Press, 1977).

Ironically, after Jordan won election as a U.S. Representative, she was named a fellow at Harvard University's Institute of Politics of its John F. Kennedy School of Government. Harvard had earlier denied her admission to its law school.

Similar to the heroines of other political biographies, Jordan's extraordinary sense of responsibility was prominent. Typically, she worked twelve to fourteen hours a day. In the U.S. House of Representatives as in the Texas Senate, Jordan was given increasingly more committee and other assignments as she demonstrated her abilities.

There are several high quality collective political biographies of women. Although an entry in a collective biography cannot offer the depth of portrayal of a woman's political career comparable to a full biography, they should not be overlooked as resources in career education. Peggy Lamson has written an excellent collective biography: In the Vanguard, Six American Women in Public Life,[6] which includes a brief but informative biography of Juanita Kreps, Secretary of Commerce under President Carter.

Prior to her appointment, Kreps had been an economics professor, a vice-president of Duke University and a member of numerous boards of directors. These experiences as well as her scholarly interests in the economics of aging and the problems of women in the work force provided a superior background for her cabinet appointment. Her roles and responsibilities as Secretary of

[6]Peggy Lamson, In the Vanguard, Six American Women in Public Life (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979).

Commerce are described in some detail despite the limited space.

These reviews provide a sampling of the kinds of career information available in women's political biographies. Young girls who become immersed in these biographies and identify with the heroines can better ascertain whether or not they might have the ability, training, personality, and commitment to successfully pursue a political career. Even without any personal career interest, the reader (female or male) can gain a better understanding of the dynamics of a political career for women and may in the future be more supportive of women political candidates and office holders at all levels of government.

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